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Leadership in out-of-school learning. The educational doctorate program at the University of Pittsburgh

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Leadership in Out-of-School Learning: The Educational Doctorate Program at the University of Pittsburgh

Thomas Akiva, Kevin Crowley, Jennifer Lin Russel, Marijke Hecht

The beginning of the 21st Century has ushered in a new era for the out-of-school learning (OSL) field. In the U.S., structured OSL time for children and youth has become normative: Family enrichment spending has steadily increased for over forty years (Duncan & Murnane, 2011) as has afterschool participation, nearly doubling from 2004 to 2014 (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Advances in research and learning design make informal learning in museums and other cultural organizations more engaging and effective than ever. Technology and advances in community infrastructures has made it possible to conceptualize a “connected learning” model proposed by multiple researchers (Ito et al., 2013) in which we can consider how best to support learning that is lifelong (across the lifespan), lifewide (across settings and topics), and connected (across digital and face-to-face contexts).

All of these developments bring new and increasingly complex problems to solve. For example, school-community partnerships are often celebrated; however, few communities make them work in ways that draw on the strengths of both school and community (Perkins, 2015). Another striking example is the stark differences in child enrichment across lines of household income; household enrichment spending (on things like summer camps, dance lessons, etc.) has steadily increased for decades for higher income families but has not significantly changed for lower income families (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Another important example is that the workforce associated with the rapidly increasing OSL field is, particularly in the U.S., generally underpaid and under-professionalized (Pozzoboni & Kirshner, 2016).

The growth, developments, and challenges of the OSL field create the need for professional leaders in out-of-school learning to address problems of practice. We need research, but research alone will not be enough to rise to the challenge that the new opportunities bring. The rise of OSL has brought the need for leaders at high levels; however, no terminal degrees exist specifically for this growing set of leaders.

Meanwhile, over the last few decades, several developments in higher education and in research support the development of a practice-focused, OSL doctoral program. Educational Doctorate (EdD) degree programs have emerged or been redesigned across the U.S. The Carnegie Program on the Educational Doctorate (CPED, www.cpedinitiative.org), launch-

ing with 25 member institutions in 2007, now boasts over 100 members. These CPED-related EdD programs provide advanced degrees that are focused on high level practice-based leadership versus the research training of PhD programs. This coincides with increasing recognition that participatory approaches like research-practice partnerships, continuous improvement, and improvement science are critical for the future of education. So, in 2016 we launched a doctoral-level program for emerging leaders in OSL.

Challenges in Designing an OSL Doctoral Program

We designed our OSL EdD program building from an existing School of Education EdD program, which launched in 2014. This cohort-based program offers a degree in three years in concentration areas like school leadership, higher education, and health and physical activity. The existence of this program made an OSL EdD possible and simplified our design challenges—the existing program has a clear structure of four courses on educational fundamentals (e.g., leadership, policy), four courses on practitioner inquiry methods, and four courses in a concentration area (in our case, OSL). However, even with this strong foundation, we considered two main challenges in designing our program.

First, we believed we would need to recruit nationally rather than just locally. Whereas the area of southwest Pennsylvania may have enough school district professionals to continuously populate an EdD program in school leadership, for example, the OSL field is smaller and we assumed we'd need to recruit from beyond our local area. As the EdD is a part-time program for working professionals, recruiting beyond locally presented the challenge of distance learning. We would need to provide ways for students to participate from a distance without sacrificing the quality we have in our face-to-face program.

Our second challenge related to the field of OSL itself. This is an extremely varied field, representing numerous contexts such as afterschool, informal learning, juvenile justice, STEM outreach, community-based arts programs, pregnancy prevention, youth employment, to name a few. In many ways, this diversity is a major strength of OSL. However, this spread also presents challenges for the field and professionalization. In our case, it meant we must design a program that is broadly applicable, yet able to be tailored to the specific professional needs of students from various sectors of OSL.

Designing the Program with Participatory Methods

Ideas for the OSL EdD began several years before we launched. We had noticed for a while that many applicants to our Ph.D. program were looking for an advanced degree in OSL, but wanted to return to practice after graduate school, as opposed to switching careers to become a researcher. We knew that our Ph.D. researcher training would serve these applicants poorly – let alone the fact that full time study would require them to pause their current OSL careers. We began thinking about how we could cover the same topics as in our Ph.D. training, but do it with the needs of practitioner leaders in mind. We sketched out the broad specifications of the program—that in addition to OSL focused capstone projects we would include four doctoral courses in topics like learning science, youth development, and evaluation.

In the year before launch we took time to consider the design of the courses themselves, with a focus on hybrid methods that allowed students to participate both locally and from a distance. We worked with a Ph.D. learning design course and acted as a client (specifically, the second author took on this role) for a small group's learning design project. The three students working on this course assignment were all interested in OSL. We asked this student group to help design OSL courses keeping in mind the two challenges described earlier. We shared with the students our perceptions of the benefits of the existing EdD structure and supports, a willingness to experiment and iterate, and our commitment to data-based decision-making.

The student team treated the design challenge as a research project. They reviewed documents and met with primary instructors associated with the OSL EdD. They surveyed 31 OSL professionals about their leadership development needs and aspirations for career advancement, and explored various technology options (for example, viewing demonstrations of learning management systems different from the one currently used by the university).

Based on these data, they arrived at several principles to consider in designing the OSL program and courses. The program should focus on cohort building in a learner-centered, strengths-based way. That is, it was clear from survey responses that the OSL field has wisdom and talents that could make educational spaces stronger if this knowledge is honored. Second it became clear that the course should blend both synchronous and asynchronous methods for hybrid courses (i.e., with some participating from a distance and some locally). They emphasized the importance of using technology for cohort building and productive learning and presented some recommended structures and tools.

The third recommendation was perhaps the most exciting. They recommended we practice research-practice partnerships within the program. That is, as we also work with PhD students who study out-of-school learning, they suggested creating class assignments that paired research-focused PhD students with practice-focused EdD students to tackle problems of practice on a team. As research-practice partnerships are becoming increasingly important in professional OSL work, why not practice how to do this in a graduate program?

Program Launch

We launched in the summer of 2017. Our first cohort includes seven students with a wide range of expertise. For example, we have an afterschool coordinator for a large public school system, a program manager at a science center, and a director of a community-based dance academy. Their rich professional backgrounds are enhancing our program as it goes, with class examples, readings, and course projects shaped to refer directly to the day jobs of our cohort. The OSL courses combine youth development and learning sciences perspectives to address informal learning, afterschool, evaluation, and organizational processes and networks.

Like all students in the University of Pittsburgh program, our OSL cohort dove into the work during their first semester by identifying an enduring problem of practice that shapes their work practice. Students analyzed the root causes of the problem through a review of research and practice-focused literature. Through four foundations courses, students will

analyze their problem of practice through multiple perspectives. They explore the leadership factors related to the problem and its potential solutions, examine how policies shape the problem and efforts to ameliorate it, and explore how social and cultural contexts (poverty, racism, urban vs. rural settings, etc.) contribute to their problem of practice. Throughout the program, students will engage in various experiences to deepen their understanding of the problem and potential solutions. Through the program's inquiry sequence, they will learn how to use systematic methods to plan for and study the impact of changes introduced to their work context aimed at addressing the problem.

One of the features of the program we are most excited about is the culminating product. A traditional doctorate program ends with a student writing a dissertation of usually about 200 to 300 pages, defending the dissertation to a committee of four or five professors, and then filing the dissertation with the university library where it sits on a shelf (or these days more likely in a database). Writing a dissertation might be useful to researchers, but how does it serve the needs of practitioners? Instead, we re-conceptualized the culminating milestone requirement to be a portfolio of professional products that students develop throughout the program. These products, all focused on the student's problem of practice, might include work such as developing a PD training, creating and testing a new after-school curriculum, conducting an evaluation of a program, writing an article for a practitioner-focused journal, or creating a policy brief. The products would be developed in consultation with faculty advisors, would often be linked to course-work throughout the three years of the program, and might even be collaboratively authored with other students in the cohort. The idea is that our EdD students work as professionals, so the work in this program should reflect that and help them to continuously build their skills, leadership, and reputations. In lieu of a traditional dissertation and oral defense, our students write a reflective summary that links the products of the portfolio.

We are excited about the contributions of this program but have much to learn. Ultimately, we hope and expect the graduates of this program to shape the future of OSL in the U.S. and beyond. We plan to continue to welcome annual cohorts of OSL leaders in our three-year program. We have an early spring application deadline, then the program starts in the summer with a week-long, in-person on-ramp, followed by synchronous classes approximately once a month. If you are interested in more information, please visit our website at education.pitt.edu or feel free to contact us.

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